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"A RUSSIAN WOLFHOUND"

Michele Savage

Short Story

Honorable Mention

It was on an unusually warm, otherwise humdrum Tuesday in October that Billie O'Neill made her rather dramatic entrance into the world of Rufus Ripley Associates, Advertising.

Carla Mitchell, who had been the agency receptionist and Mr. Ripley's secretary for three years, had finished all the work on her desk at nine-thirty. Mr. Ripley had instructed her not to disturb him unless she had a good reason; he was working on a very important campaign for Sensible Shoes.

Having nothing better to do, Carla brushed her long, blond hair 100 strokes, reapplied her coral lipstick, and blew a kiss to the picture of her current boyfriend on her desk. Carla had a penchant for handsome young professionals; Bruce was a handsome young CPA.

Through the open windows of her ground floor front office, Carla could observe the comings and goings of people on picturesque Random Street. Most of the houses in this small historic district of the city had been converted into offices or boutiques. Ripley Associates was located in the west wing of a yellow Edwardian house with green shutters; an architectural firm inhabited the east wing.

As the chimes in a nearby church began to strike eleven, a pumpkin-colored Volkswagen pulled into a parking space in front of the building, and a tall, slim girl with bright red curls climbed out. She stood on the sidewalk and slowly turned 360 degrees, surveying her surroundings. She was so absorbed that she didn't seem to notice when the wind blew the full skirt of her blue dress, exposing most of her long, yellow-stockinged legs to public scrutiny. Everyone else on Random Street noticed, however.

Seconds later, the door to Carla's office opened, and the girl in the yellow stockings walked in. Carla noticed that her shoes were yellow, too.

"Heigh-ho," she said with an engaging grin for Carla.

Carla returned the smile and stopped buffing her nails. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, please. I'm here to see—oh, my! What a perfectly lovely asparagus fern!" Her slanted blue eyes zeroed in on the plant on Carla's desk. "I simply adore plants, don't you? They're so earthy and honest. Plants never lie to you, and they're always faithful and sympathetic."

"A RUSSIAN WOLFHOUND" (continued)

"So are collies," said Carla. "Now, what can I do for you?"

"Oh, of course, how silly. I'm here to see Mr. Rufus Ripley, if you please."

"Why do you want to see him, Miss...?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you? How rude of me. You must be Carla Mitchell since there's a little sign on your desk that says so." She extended her hand, and Carla shook it. "Awfully nice to meet you. Does your fern have a name?"

Carla laughed. "No, he doesn't. Do you?"

"Oh, sorry again! I'm Billie O'Neill. By the way, your fern is a she, not a he—I mean, she's a her instead of a him."

"How can you tell? Never mind. If you'll tell me why you want to see Mr. Ripley—"

"I understand he's in search of an artist." Billie O'Neill gestured to the green portfolio she was carrying. "Well, I am an artist in search of a job."

Carla pressed the buzzer, then remembered that her boss had asked not to be disturbed.

Mr. Ripley's voice sounded even more gruff over the intercom than it did in person. "What is it, Miss Mitchell?"

"Miss Billie O'Neill is here about the opening in the art department, Mr. Ripley."

"Oh—very well! Send her in."

Carla nodded to Billie. "You can go in. But before you do, would you mind a little friendly advice?"

"Of course."

"Don't misunderstand me, but, if I were you, I'd be a little less—garrulous with Mr. Ripley than you have been with me."

Billie smiled. "Don't worry. I've read all those articles in **Cosmo** that tell you how to act during a job interview."

For the first ten minutes of her interview with Rufus Ripley, Billie adhered closely to the advice Carla and Helen Gurley Brown had given her. She decided to let her portfolio, of which she was justifiably proud, speak for her.

"I'm very impressed with your work, Miss O'Neill, but there doesn't seem to be any advertising art in here. You do have past experience, don't you?"

Billie took a resume from her purse and held it out to him. "Not exactly. Since my college graduation last year, I've been working as a free lance artist. I've sold a few canvases, but not enough to enable me to support my cat in the manner to which he has become accustomed." She bit her tongue to prevent any further chatter from escaping.

"Well, I'm awfully sorry, but we do insist on prior experience and references. And we are looking for an ad artist, not a Post-Impressionist painter."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Ripley," Billie said, "but I am not a Post-Impressionist. My style is my own."

Rufus Ripley thought that, while Miss O'Neill was charming, she was also under-qualified. He tried to sound angry. "Miss O'Neill, we thank you for your interest, but I'm afraid I cannot waste any more time. I have an irate client on my hands, and I must go upstairs to the studio and supervise his campaign personally. Mr. Sturdy of Sensible Shoes, Inc., is a very difficult man to please."

Suddenly, Mr. Ripley found himself telling Billie O'Neill all about the Sensible Shoes campaign. He described the product, the market, and the client, who insisted on a sex appeal approach.

"And no one in our art department can seem to think of a way to make suede brogues look sexy," he said.

While Mr. Ripley talked, Billie sketched. She ripped the page out of her sketch book and presented it to him when he had finished.

"What's this?" Ripley looked at the picture. It depicted a very beautiful, sexy

"A RUSSIAN WOLFHOUND" (continued)

woman (who looked a lot like Sophia Loren) wearing a low-cut blouse and a pencil slim skirt that was slit to several inches above her knees. She had gorgeous legs, and on her feet were a pair of sturdy, sensible brogues.

Rufus Ripley smiled. He loved it, probably because he sensed that Mr. Sturdy of Sensible Shoes, Inc., would love it.

"Welcome to Ripley Associates, Miss O'Neill."

Though Billie had very little trouble adjusting to life at Ripley's, a few of the employees in the art department had difficulty accepting her. Most of the other artists were much older than Billie and didn't approve of the style of her work, which they considered too bold and erratic for advertising. However, she soon charmed them as she had charmed Mr. Ripley. They were kept in an almost constant state of amusement by Billie O'Neill's whimsical imagination.

She had a rare gift for speculation that could make any person, place, or product sound more interesting than it actually was. The sales of Sensible Shoes almost doubled after her campaign was launched under the slogan, "Who says Sensible Shoes have to be boring?"

Mr. Ripley said that it was Billie's fathomless imagination that made her such a good ad artist and all-around lovely girl.

"That Billie," he said to Carla one foggy day in February. "She's never bored and she's never boring. Why, if I weren't old enough to be her uncle, I'd marry her like that." He snapped his fingers.

Carla smiled; she knew that the boss was really old enough to be Billie's great-uncle. "Mrs. Ripley might have something to say about that."

"She'd probably be glad to get rid of me," he said, his pointed little grey beard twitching with laughter at his own wit.

Carla, who knew how narrow-minded and domineering he could be, silently agreed that his wife probably would be glad to get rid of him. She also agreed with what he said about Billie—he probably would marry her if he could.

Carla was well aware that most of the men who knew her new best friend Billie were at least a little in love with her, and why shouldn't they be? Billie was a beautiful girl. But it was her mad-cap sense of humor that attracted most of the attention. She was so spontaneous and so deliciously zany. Listening to Billie was like reading a story written through the stream of consciousness.

Carla sometimes thought that she and Billie got along so well because

She tilted her head to one side. "He just seems so...Unique, that's the word I'm looking for! It would take a Russian wolfhound to please a man like that."

they were almost total opposites. She was calm, levelheaded, and realistic where Billie was emotional, impulsive, and fanciful. They had become very close in the past four months, but there was still something about Billie that puzzled Carla.

"Why don't you go out more often?" she asked Billie as they walked to lunch in the fog that day.

"With who?" Billie asked.

"With men!" They stopped to look at the diamonds in the jewelry store window. "You could have a date with any man you know, and you know it. But you're practically a recluse! The only men you've gone out with in the past four months were people I fixed you up with, but you won't let me do that any more. Why don't you go out with someone?"

"Like who?" Billie asked, walking on to the bakery window and studying the croissants.

"Like any one of the dozen men who ask you out every week," said Carla. "It's not as if you didn't have any opportunities."

"Oh, look at that perfectly lovely red hat in the boutique window! I'm so glad hats are making a comeback, aren't you?"

"Billie!"

"Most of the men I know are so boring, Carla. Don't be offended, but the men you introduced me to were the most boring of all. They were all accountants and lawyers. I wish I could meet someone really different and exciting—like Peter O'Toole or Cary Grant or Humphrey Bogart," she said.

Carla frowned. "Don't you think you're setting your standards a bit high? I mean, some of these people who seem boring to you now might seem really fascinating if you would get to know them."

"Maybe and maybe not," Billie said, turning into the door of Alistair's, their favorite restaurant.

They came to Alistair's, just a few blocks from the ad agency, as often as they could afford to, which never seemed often enough. Carla liked the place because it was popular with many rising young professionals, some of them male, single, and financially well off. It was here that she had met her current boyfriend, whom Billie teasingly called "Steve the Lawyer."

Billie came to Alistair's for the atmosphere. She thought it looked like an elegant, expensive men's club. The walls were covered with carved wooden

"A RUSSIAN WOLFHOUND" (continued)

panels and English hunting prints. Small, intimate tables were strewn across the parquet floor. A discreet bar stood at one end of the restaurant; at the other end was an imposing fireplace. The waiters looked like valets in their pin-striped vests and trousers. Billie was certain that London's legendary White's was a lot like Alistair's.

Since it was after one-thirty, the dining room was sparsely populated. Their waiter gave them an excellent table by a window near the fireplace and took their order.

Carla had been devouring her quiche Lorraine and chattering about Steve for almost fifteen minutes when she noticed that Billie was neglecting both the lunch and the conversation. Instead, she seemed to be staring fixedly over Carla's left shoulder.

"Billie? Billie!" Carla waved her hand in front of her friend's face. "Eat your quiche and talk to me."

Pushing her plate away, Billie put her elbow on the table and rested her chin in her hand. "I'll bet he owns a Russian wolfhound," she said dreamily.

Carla laughed. "Who? A what?"

"A Russian wolfhound." Billie's eyes wandered back to Carla's face. "You know—they're big dogs."

"I know what they are, but who are you talking about?"

"HIM, of course," Billie said, as if there were only one man in the room.

Carla turned her head in the direction of Billie's gaze. Seated at the table nearest the fireplace was a dark-haired man of about thirty wearing a grey houndstooth jacket. He had a swarthy complexion and well defined facial features. His eyes looked almost black. He seemed so preoccupied with some papers he was reading that he took no notice of anything else in the room, not even his drink.

Carla nodded appreciatively. "Very cute."

Billie seemed appalled. "Carla, the word 'cute' hardly seems an accurate description for someone who looks like that! He's . . . the most handsome man I've ever seen."

"Really?" Carla looked again. "Who is he?"

"Oh, I don't know. I've never seen him before in my life."

"Then what makes you think he owns a Russian wolfhound?"

"A RUSSIAN WOLFHOUND" (continued)

"One senses these things," Billie said. She tilted her head to one side. "He just seems so elegant and so terribly interesting. Unique, that's the word I'm looking for! It would take a Russian wolfhound to please a man like that!"

Carla, who was used to Billie's rambling imagination, prepared to hear more. "But if you've never seen or spoken to him before, how do you know he's so 'unique'? He could be quite average, maybe even boring."

"Impossible. Just look at him!"

"I did. He's cute but not spectacular," Carla said. She enjoyed encouraging Billie sometimes.

"How can you say that? He's exactly like a Greek statue, except there's something Slavic about his cheekbones. My God, he even has a cleft in his chin! And he obviously has a fantastic body. Look at those shoulders!"

Carla looked from Billie to the handsome stranger and back again. "He's sitting down. He could be hiding a peg leg under the table."

Billie was delighted. "How romantic! Didn't Errol Flynn have a peg leg in one of those old pirate movies?"

"A RUSSIAN WOLFHOUND" (continued)

"I don't remember. Eat your quiche."

"He's so exotic looking," Billie said, picking up her fork. "I'm sure he's foreign. What do you suppose he does for a living?"

"Maybe he's an international jewel thief," Carla said dramatically. "Or a double agent."

"Carla, be serious." Billie sipped her wine. "He looks more like a poet than a spy. That tousled black hair is so Byronic."

Carla thought the conversation was becoming bizarre, even for Billie, but she said nothing.

"He looks wealthy," Billie said. "If he isn't foreign, he must at least have been educated abroad, perhaps at the Sorbonne."

"No, I think he's probably an Oxford man," Carla said. "One senses these things."

"Don't be absurd. He's not wearing a tie."

Carla laughed. "Absurd? Me? You're the one who has weird fantasies about complete strangers in public places."

Billie closed her eyes and smiled. "I don't think he's a complete stranger. I'm almost sure I knew him in another life."

Carla shook her head. "You're strange, Billie. Why don't you write a book or something?"

"He and I will write one together, after we become lovers. Do you think I should offer my body to him now, or wait until he asks for it?"

"That's up to you, dear," Carla said, looking over her shoulder. "But if you're going to do it now, you'd better hurry. He's paying his check."

They watched silently as the handsome stranger paid the waiter, put on his trench coat, and disappeared into the fog outside of the restaurant.

"He's gone," Billie said wistfully. "Gone forever. I'll never see him again. And I was so looking forward to letting him seduce me."

Carla was relieved to see him go. "It's probably better this way. Try to forget him."

"Impossible. He was exactly the sort of person I was looking for—dark, handsome, and different. At least, I think he was, but now I'll never know for sure."

"A RUSSIAN WOLFHOUND" (continued)

Carla smiled. "Look, why don't you let me get you a date with Steve's friend Paul? I've told him a lot about you, and he's dying to meet you."

Billie hesitated. "What's he like?"

"He's dark, but not as dark as your mystery man, and he's very cute—I mean, handsome. Of course, he's not a poet, but he **is** foreign—almost!" Carla paused. "Oh, what the hell. I'm going to level with you. He's an engineer, and he's from Chicago. But I swear he's not boring. He's different—almost as different as you are."

"But does he have a dog?"

"Oh, yes, he has the cutest little basset hound named Baxter."

"Well," Billie said reluctantly, "okay. But it just won't be the same without the Russian wolfhound." □
